

FEATURE

'Send us more turkeys' says Central American embassy

Story and photos by
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When military members and their families assigned to the embassies in 32 countries in Africa and Central and South America sit down to eat a holiday meal, they can give thanks to Charleston AFB, because the base more than likely sent their food by airlift.

It is all part of Charleston's Defense Commissary Agency overseas program that flies food items every month. The 13 members of the base Commissary order the food items submitted by each military member and their family from the respective embassy. The items are picked up in tractor trailer trucks by the 437th Transportation Squadron and delivered to the 437th Aerial Port Squadron for shipment by military airlift. Food items consist of everything from meat and produce to canned goods. The base Commissary is the only Commissary on the East Coast that provides these food items to the embassies in these countries.

"We work closely with the supply person from each embassy to discuss any discrepancies in our orders," said CAFB Commissary store director Eddie Williams. "We make sure the 15 to 20 people in each embassy get what they ordered. We pull all the items together to send down to these embassies."

Williams explained that each embassy has a chain of command that will visit and discuss staff and

support, usually with someone like a squadron commander.

"Most are extremely pleased with the service that we provide," added Williams. "We have an annual conference with these commanders to discuss our support and we're always open to feedback on the telephone or by e-mail."

Military members and their families in the embassies do the grocery shopping by looking through a monthly DECA catalog with prices and item descriptions. The catalog is produced by the information management section of the Eastern Region Southern Area Commissary headquarters at Maxwell AFB, Ala. Commissary officials estimate more than \$1.2 million of food items were shipped last year.

"Any embassy can order items that we carry," Williams said. "We receive their consolidated orders by email and we go and order the items. There are no limits on the quantity for their monthly orders. The commissary offers 14,593 items that they can purchase."

It's just like shopping for groceries on the Internet and it is a tremendous quality of life program, according to Elizabeth Mazell, lead overseas support technician. "We usually get their orders about 14 days before the scheduled airlift dates, but only fill the orders once a month," said Mazell. "They can order anything that we carry. Most of the purchases are in case lots."

Military members and their families really appreciate the opportunity to order their groceries," she continued. "It is a very important quality of life program for them. For some, the local economy does not provide the same quality and selection of groceries that they are used to in the states. We are the only Commissary that allows people to shop for their groceries like this. We bend over backwards to fill these orders because we know how important it is for them."

Mazell said the holidays are busy periods because the embassies will order lots of turkeys, hams and other traditional foods.

"We had an order of 175 turkeys last thanksgiving," said Mazell. "It is very common for increased orders of certain ethnic and religious foods during Easter and Passover. There are always lots of orders for ice cream and we also get lots of orders for breakfast cereals for kids."

Louis Stille, a warehouse super-

visor in the Commissary, said they breakdown all the orders by country.

"We mark each item with an account number so they don't get mixed up," Stille said. "All the items are placed in cardboard boxes. Frozen and perishable items are placed in polar containers and we add dry ice, ensuring the items remain cold for 72 hours."

The polar containers are large 40- by 48- by 36-inch plastic containers. Each container is banded, sealing it for shipment.

The orders are usually sent out on Sundays and Tuesdays depending on the country. Each embassy order can range from 2,000 to 12,000 pounds of groceries per country. "When the items get in country, they have people check over the order to make sure they received everything that was ordered," Stille said.

The 437th Transportation Squadron usually hauls three truck loads each day.

The 450 men and women of the 437 APS live up to its motto of excellence in airlift by unloading the trucks, placing the items on 463L pallets, weighing them and storing the perishable food items in massive refrigerators until they are loaded on C-17s or other aircraft the next day.

"If only people knew how important this mission was for the families and military members; they depend upon us to get them these groceries, especially during the holidays when they are separated from their loved ones but are still doing our nation's business," said Maj. Darren Baker, 437 APS operations officer. "If these shipments are delayed because of bad weather or other uncontrollable factors, you can see the tremendous drop in their morale."

Besides direct flights to select U.S. embassies, there is also a new hub and



Romeo SanPedro, a materials handler in the base Commissary, loads groceries into a container for shipment to an overseas embassy.

spoke operation where DECA and other general cargo are sent to Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, and Soto Canto, Honduras.

"From there they run it out to the embassies in Central and South America using U.S. Southern Command C-130 aircraft," said Senior Master Sgt. Randy Shallenberger, superintendent of the Air Freight Flight, 437 APS. "Only Charleston provides continuous support for Central and South America."

The process to check the paperwork, build the pallets, weigh them and get the cargo ready for airlift can take about four to five hours for a full load.

"It gets pretty interesting when the aircraft breaks down or there are delays," said Shallenberger. "When that happens, even if it is only for a day, we have to reopen all the perishable items and check the ice. We often have to replace the wet and dry ice when there are delays and it takes a while to rebuild the pallets. Re-icing a full shipment with four people takes up to five hours to complete."



Clarence Fordham, a materials handler in the base Commissary, prepares to seal a polar container of perishable groceries for shipment to an embassy overseas.



Senior Airman Anthony Mancino, a special handler for the 437th Aerial Port Squadron, examines a shipping document for a polar container. He is checking to see how long the dry ice will be good.